

## **"Becoming Followers"**

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Let's open our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, help us to become faithful followers of Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.**

I'd like to begin with a poem by Stewart Henderson, called *Splintered Messiah*:

I don't want a splintered Messiah  
In a sweat stained greasy grey robe  
I want a new one  
I couldn't take this one to parties  
People would say 'Who's your friend?'  
I'd give an embarrassed giggle and change the subject.  
If I took him home  
I'd have to bandage his hands  
The neighbours would think he's a football hooligan  
I don't want his cross in the hall  
It doesn't go with the wallpaper  
I don't want him standing there  
Like a sad ballet dancer with holes in his tights  
I want a different Messiah  
Streamlined and inoffensive  
I want one from a catalogue  
Who's as quiet as a monastery  
I want a package tour Messiah  
Not one who takes me to Golgotha  
I want a King of Kings  
With blow waves in his hair  
I don't want the true Christ  
I want a false one.

In our reading last week, Simon son of Jonah, the one who Jesus nicknamed the "Rock" and we have come to call Peter, confessed to Jesus, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." But Peter didn't understand that Jesus was, as Henderson suggests, a *Splintered Messiah*.

Our passage today follows immediately from last week and begins: "From that time on." It signifies a major turning point in the gospel according to Matthew. In the first half, God reveals *who* Jesus is; Jesus' true identity: "the Messiah, the Son of the living God." From that time on, it's about *how* to become followers; Jesus focuses on his final instructions to his disciples as they journey together toward the cross.

It's a quick switch and Peter does not yet grasp that Jesus must suffer and be crucified. To Peter, death is defeat. Peter wants to preserve Jesus' earthly life and he can't imagine that God would let the Son of God die. Peter can't yet imagine resurrection and what Jesus means when he says that he will "be killed, and on the third day be raised." After healing many and raising Lazarus from death, surely God would not allow the authorities to inflict the humiliating and gruesome spectacle of crucifixion upon the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

Jesus begins his final instructions to his disciples with an instruction to "deny yourselves and take up their cross and follow me." How many of you have ever been on a diet? Everyone? Then you know what it's like to deny yourself. You stop eating ice cream or donuts or whatever, but the ice cream or donuts or whatever still seem to relentlessly call out to you with the persistence of a duct cleaning service. Your body and mind sometimes want to sin, but you have to somehow say "No." You have to deny yourself.

Deny yourself and take up your cross. So, you are resisting the ice cream, now take up your cross. This doesn't mean to continue denying yourself all joy and pleasure, and be rewarded some future day in heaven. And carrying your cross isn't continuing to carry all of the pain and suffering in your life. Jonathan Davis suggests that the action of taking up your cross is about not being afraid of suffering and death. In Peter's mind, the Messiah is one who comes in strength and power to defeat evil. As a follower of Jesus, Peter expects to be a part of that glorious victory, not to suffer and die. Jesus is saying live life and do not be afraid of the cross.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me. We follow all sorts of things – mostly passively. We follow the Raptors, the Leafs and the Blue Jays. We follow exciting series on TV or Netflix. We follow the stock market, politics, the pandemic, relations with the U.S. and China. We follow all sorts of things – passively. So, we think of following Jesus like we might follow a Christian blog – passively. But Jesus calls us to deny ourselves of selfish, sinful activities, to not be afraid of suffering and death, and to actively follow the teaching of Jesus. It's a bold reorientation of our priorities and our lives.

And then Jesus relays a great paradox: "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." For what benefit is it to gain all sorts of material treasures if you lose your life. What material treasures would you trade for a joyful life, a loving life, an eternal life?

Howard Hughes, was one of the most financially successful individuals in the world. Initially, he really "lived it up," but he ended up losing what was most valuable - his quality of life, and then life itself. Howard Hughes' last years were spent in isolation, hidden on the top floor of the Xanadu Hotel in the Bahamas. Bill Hybels wrote that before he died, Hughes "was emaciated, practically skeletal, with only 120 pounds stretched over his six-foot, four-inch frame ... Finally, emaciated and hooked on morphine and codeine, he died at age 67." When he died there was no one to claim his body and a distant cousin was given custody of his body. Howard Hughes is a sad story, of a man who attained great riches, but lost his life - long before he died.

Jesus spells out the benefits of following him, but the disciples will soon realize that there is a high cost to following Jesus. For just as Jesus suffers and dies at the conclusion of their journey to Jerusalem, they too will suffer and die their own horrific deaths as martyrs of the early Christian church. Fortunately, with Jesus' coaching and his resurrection appearances to them after his crucifixion, the disciples and generations that follow, will not fear suffering and death, and will become faithful followers of Jesus.

Peter is praised as the rock upon which Jesus will build his church, and when Jesus tells Peter that he is now a stumbling block, it's another clever play on the rock nickname. Peter, like Satan in the wilderness, tries to deflect Jesus from the way of God. Satan has lots of tricks and traps to use as stumbling blocks on our paths, and often, the best time to trick or trap us is after a victory. In Peter's case, it was right after Jesus told him that he is going to be the rock upon which the church will be built. Peter wants to follow Jesus on the smooth road of a worldly and successful Messiah. His thoughts are turned inward to personal pride and success; to human things instead of divine things. Jesus knows he has a difficult journey ahead where God will act decisively in Jesus for the benefit of all humanity in every time and in every place; nurturing in us our desire to become followers of Jesus.

Following Jesus requires dedication and hard work, and sometimes the process can be painful, especially if we get off track a little and we need to be stripped of selfishness, pride and fear.

In C. S. Lewis' book, *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the boy, Eustace, becomes a dragon. In order to become a little boy again, he must undergo a tremendous amount of pain as the dragon skin is peeled away and torn from him by the great lion Aslan, who represents God. Only after he endures this painful process is he truly transformed from a dragon back into a boy. Sometimes our sin becomes such a part of us that it requires this same kind of painful ripping and tearing to free us. God does not seek to hurt us, but God does seek to make us more like Jesus as we become faithful followers, and this can be painful. It's a cross we must bear, and not fear.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome gives us some guidance for following Jesus. It begins: "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour." And it ends with "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Evil doers are typically not very happy and their pursuits tend to lead them to increasingly unhappy lives, filled with anger and fear. But even for evil doers, there is hope. For lasting change in our lives, we must fill our lives with love. Love is the most powerful force in the universe, because God is love: love invigorates; love revitalizes; love renews; love refreshes; love heals; love uplifts; love energizes; love empowers. Paul tells us to take delight in honouring each other and in showing genuine affection. And when we do, God miraculously leads us to life abundant!

Just as Jesus puts Satan behind him in his wilderness temptations, Jesus sees human weakness and fallibility in Peter's rebuke. The disciples, as leaders of the early church, still had a lot to learn on their journey with Jesus. They will ultimately follow Jesus to suffering and death, but also to resurrection: the triumph of God over the forces of darkness and death. We're becoming followers of Jesus on an enlightening journey of wonder and hope; a journey of joy and love; a journey of life abundant. Thanks be to God. Amen.